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Belarus: Researching Labor Management in the Environment of Silence

Contributors: Hanna Danilovich

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Abstract

The case study describes research process, the choice of research paradigm, and research methods for the study of incidence of centrally reduced working time at Belarusian industrial enterprises. The adherence of the management of Belarusian companies to Soviet-style organizational culture which assumes complete secrecy over issues of employment relations and personnel management coupled with the lack of secondary data made the author create a specific combination of qualitative and quantitative methods to extract trustworthy information. The role of gatekeepers and important ethical decisions are also discussed.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this case, students should be able to

- Discuss the use of multiple paradigms in research projects conducted in complicated research contexts
 - Compare and contrast the usefulness of quantitative and qualitative methods when researching employment relations at enterprise settings
 - Plan and draft research design of a study of employment relations at an enterprise when part of secondary data is missing
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Project Overview and Context

This case study illustrates one in a series of ongoing projects united under the common theme—researching labor management in Belarus—which I have been conducting for the last 10 years since I was a PhD student at Middlesex University Business School. The initial goal of the research was to understand whether two decades of transition resulted in increased autonomy of managerial decision-making, and increased company independence from its external institutional environment. After successfully defending the PhD, I turned my attention to narrower but extremely pressing issues of the management of internal labor markets, such as working conditions, training, intra-organizational conflict, employee voice, and age discrimination.

Before going into the particulars of the research case, I believe it is important to understand the socio-economic and political context in which the research is being carried out. The disappearance of the Warsaw Pact and the Comecon (Council of Mutual Economic Assistance—the organization established in 1949 to coordinate and assist the progress of economic development of the countries of Eastern Europe) following “Velvet Revolutions” of the 1980s and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 left former socialist Eastern European countries and newly established post-Soviet economies in social, economic, and political crises. One of the worst consequences for enterprises across the region was the severance of established industrial networks and the collapse of the system of state subsidization. While some sought a solution in massive

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lay-offs and shrinkage of production, others tried surviving without destroying the “working collective.” The latter approach was the most visible in the countries which opted out of rapid liberalization, privatization, and macroeconomic stabilization—the three pillars of “shock therapy.”

Belarus is one of the economies of post-Soviet transition periphery (for the term, see Wood & Demirbag, 2015), which decided to hold on to its Soviet legacy. The country is best known for its excessive government control. While “official” academics insist on the “unique way for Belarus” (e.g., Nikitenko, 2008; Rudenkov, 2003; Shimov, 2009), the broad consensus in the literature from outside the country is that Belarusian government has done very little in terms of structural reforms and privatization since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 while tightening the grip on the economy. Whatever economic growth had taken place in Belarusian economy until the latest crisis of 2011, it was artificially created through exploiting close economic ties with Russia (e.g., Bakanova, Freinkman, & Sidarenka, 2010; Cuaresma, Oberhofer, & Andronova Vincelette, 2012; Fritz, 2007; Nutu, 2005). Politically, Belarus exhibits a clear trend toward dictatorship through increasing precedence of Presidential Decrees over legal codes and continuing oppression and marginalization of opposition forces (e.g., Danilovich, 2016; Way, 2005). At company level, managerial practice is dominated by unitarist “labour collective” philosophy and Taylorist approach to personnel management—core features of Soviet-style management.

Lack of reliable secondary statistics and the nature of the primary data collected made me abandon the idea of solving the problem using econometrics and made me turn to identifying the actual degree of managerial autonomy from the angle of human resource management and organizational culture. The refocusing of the research led, in turn, to the need to completely rework the methodological approach and the weighting of qualitative and quantitative methods in the PhD. It also immensely complicated the process of data collection but at the same time made the whole PhD process much more rewarding because I was able to start opening the “black box” of post-Soviet personnel management practices in Belarus which had not received any significant attention in the literature until then.

The project described in the case study is a part of later research which looks into changes in working conditions in Belarusian enterprises. It specifically focuses on increased incidence of two forms of compulsory reduced working time: short-time working and “administrative leave” (involuntary leave used by the management to cut labor costs). The goal of the project was to understand the degree to which workers accept their current industrial position and thus to either confirm or refute the existing argument on “quiescence” of labor and its acceptance of current industrial arrangement regardless of worsening working conditions, due to continuous influence of the Soviet past (Crowley, 2004).

Research Design

Determining the structure and the outline of the project presented a few challenges. The first was a choice of a general paradigm. The usual choice between logical positivism (naturalism) and social constructivism and, hence, between quantitative or qualitative methods was not an option because the study could not be done

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using just one set of methods due to lack of reliable secondary data. Not only they are partially present in open sources and those that are publicly available are censored, but most of the data on working time are not centrally collected, and a few enterprises actually make an effort to collect it.

The decision was made to follow two paradigms: social constructivism and pragmatism. Employment relations are largely built on socially constructed concepts. They also have individuals as their major participants and hence, to collect trustworthy information, one needs to use individual workers and managers as a source of necessary data. As the information provided by human participants is always subjective, it can be best analyzed through Diltney's *verstehen*, an interpretive understanding of the meanings participants give to their experiences, which is the main method of hermeneutic social constructivism (see, for example, Baert, Weinberg, & Mottier, 2011, p. 481).

At the same time, personal experiences could not be the only source of data. Available bits of secondary statistics (from national statistical publications and the archives of the enterprises selected for the study) as well as available enterprise documents were analyzed. Thus, the variability of data required employing a mixed-methods approach not typical for social constructivism which prefers a qualitative approach. Hence, the obvious choice for the second element of the research paradigm was pragmatism which accepts both qualitative and quantitative techniques, is both deductive and inductive, considers both objective and subjective points of view, and accepts external reality (Tashakkori & Teddie, 1998, p. 23), thus, in fact, approving the use of whatever methodological approach works best under specific research circumstances (see, for example, Creswell, 2009; Tashakkori & Teddie, 1998). Choosing pragmatism as a part of research paradigm allowed me to adopt an emergent mixed-methods approach to maximize the data available. As qualitative and quantitative methods were used in a more or less equal proportion, the research can be considered an equivalent status design study (Creswell, 2009). This also assumes a multilevel use of approaches, that is, "different types of methods at different levels of data aggregation" (Tashakkori & Teddie, 1998, p. 18).

Mixed-Methods Design

When designing the combination of methods for the study, I followed interactive approach to mixed-methods design. In this recently developed perspective, to select the most appropriate methods for the study, the researcher assesses five essential elements: the goal of the study, its conceptual framework, research questions, methods, and research validity (see, for example, Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Maxwell, Chmiel, & Rogers, 2015). Another important dimension to remember is external influence, for example, existing research, ethical considerations, and research circumstances. Hence, research design is seen as the result of interacting elements, not simply as a set of methods technically suitable for the job. In my case, issues such as external and internal data validity, as well as the need to create a composition of methods which would help opening the black box without destroying long-term relationships with enterprises and harming the respondents, played a crucial role in the way I developed the mixed-methods study. I ended up integrating

primary qualitative and quantitative data to create a comprehensive system of the management of reduced working time in Belarusian industrial setting. Looking at the data from this systematic perspective allowed, in my view, to see specific patterns of use of certain forms of compulsory reduced working time (CRWT), something I would've not been able to see if I had given preference to quantitative research design, as I initially planned.

Research Practicalities

The research process itself was quite long. Luckily, I had a good idea of how to approach the situation, as it was not my first piece of research on Belarus. The first fundamental decision which proved very successful was the choice in favor of using a gatekeeper to access the enterprises. To avoid the hassle of going through the lengthy process of obtaining permissions from government bodies which require securing official gatekeepers at various levels of bureaucratic hierarchy, I decided to team up with one of local academics to go around the problem. The cooperation proved mutually beneficial and turned into a long-term partnership in the end.

The second decision regarded the sampling procedure. Workers in both state-controlled and private companies in Belarus experience similar working conditions, particular with regard to working time. As private-sector companies are much smaller and might not be representable of the total workforce, I decided to go to large state-controlled industrial enterprises. The enterprises selected for this particular study were four large quasi-privatized enterprises located in the Mogilev region of Belarus, employing 15,546 staff at the time of the research. The term “quasi-privatized” used here refers to enterprises which are de jure private (they are usually open or closed joint-stock companies) but with the state as the major shareholder (up to 90% of shares) they are de facto state-owned and continue to be regulated by state-appointed directors. The enterprises represented a cross-section of industries: one major chemical fiber manufacturer, two textile companies, and two machine-building plants (agricultural and construction machinery).

The third decision concerned the ethical side of the research. One of the most prominent features of Soviet-style management of Belarusian enterprises is an almost complete secrecy surrounding the issues of company management, particularly when it comes to human resources. In the case of Western academics, this is mostly done by simply refusing the requests to conduct the studies, sometimes disregarding the official permission obtained from the state. Where the management agrees to cooperate, the director usually insists on the researcher being shadowed by one of personnel managers which makes it next to impossible to talk to non-managerial personnel and any survey has to use Aesopian language.

In addition, Belarusians in general are wary of any research and do not believe in confidentiality and anonymity. Researchers are perceived as accountable to enterprise management or state authorities. To receive responses to questionnaires, they had to be distributed and collected by enterprise personnel managers making it impossible to ask direct questions. It also proved impossible to persuade people to disclose any information about their working conditions while at work. Hence, most interviews with managers

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and/or workers had to be conducted outside of the enterprises, usually in the cafes during their lunch hour. Moreover, the interviewees only agreed to talk after having being assured that the interview would go “*sub rosa*.” That created an ethical dilemma for me as a researcher because the interviewees also refused to sign any informed consent forms; they were afraid to leave any “paper trace.” After consulting Middlesex University ethical committee, I received the permission to carry on the research; it was decided that the protection of participants’ interests, so that no harm would come to them as the result of participation in the research, as stated in the 2004 EU Code of Ethics for Socio-Economic Research, superseded the requirement of obtaining written consent.

Methods in Action

To obtain as much information on compulsory reduced working time, the following mix of methods was used.

Quantitative Methods

The quantitative method used included *a survey questionnaire for non-managerial personnel*, which focused on changes to working conditions in the last 3 years, with particular respect to changes in the mode of work and the number of hours worked. As the topic had been previously undeveloped, I had to create a questionnaire from scratch. The only prior source I could partially use was the questionnaire used in my PhD a few years earlier. One of the most challenging moments here was the formulation of particular questions. I knew that the survey would have to be conducted with the help of enterprise personnel managers (it was one of the conditions of the access to personnel). Therefore, I could not openly ask whether workers liked or disliked the changes, as well as inquire for their opinions on the actions of the management. To avoid such complications I decided to (a) use Aesopian language (i.e., disguise questions so that they would not cause the management’s suspicion), (b) manage the degree of truthfulness of the answers through control questions and by using differently formulated questions with similar meanings, and (c) use a mix of close-ended and open-ended questions to better capture the attitudes. I haven’t consulted any particular methods resources this time, but for anyone thinking of conducting a complicated survey, I would recommend Oppenheim (2005), the book on questionnaire design I used when working on my PhD.

The survey was created in two versions—for employees on piece rate and time rate. A total of 1,147 questionnaires were distributed, and 831 valid questionnaires were received back making it a success, with response rate of 72.4%. I attribute the high response rate to the fact that the questionnaires were distributed and collected by personnel managers who were assigned to my colleague and myself. So, interestingly enough, the attempt of senior management of the enterprises to control our movements worked pretty well for us in the end. Obviously, one may question the method of distribution because it potentially compromised respondent anonymity. However, the method did not negatively influence the quality of responses in that it did not make them less critical of management, and hence did not affect the quality and validity of findings.

The next quantitative method is the *statistical analysis* of available national statistics on labor and enterprise

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statistical data. Some of the information on the enterprises involved was obtained from national statistical sources and the rest of the data, including the data on average monthly wages and CRWT incidence (total number of days of administrative leave per category of workers/per enterprise/per year, number of working hours lost due to short work time/number of workers affected by administrative leave/short work time per enterprise per year), were extracted from the archives of the enterprises. The main problems here were lack of common system in enterprise records and lack of aggregated statistics at enterprises. Only one enterprise out of four was actually keeping score on how many workers were affected by CRWT, for every other I had to literally dig through enterprise databases and printed archives searching for information. As some of the information was missing and enterprises did not have any methodology for its collection, I had to create my own measurements from seemingly collateral/unrelated data to see the impact of CRWT on the workforce.

Qualitative Methods

The qualitative methods used included *semi-structured interviews* with labor planning managers, foremen, and technical specialists, and one interview with a skilled worker (11 interviews altogether, 5 with managerial personnel and 6 with non-managerial personnel). The interviews with managers were formal, had to be pre-planned, with interview times and main themes agreed with the interviewee. The interviews with non-managerial personnel were informal and took place “sub rosa,” often outside of interviewees’ workplaces; while the times of the interviews were usually agreed, the topics were not. The decision to conduct semi-structured interviews for this project was determined by the fact that, on one hand, it allowed providing the management with a list of general topics of the interviews, which was a requirement from the senior management of the enterprises, and, on the other hand, this format allowed me some freedom in asking specific questions within these topics. This helped turn the interviews to the discussion of sensitive issues with regard to CRWT and obtain information crucial for answering the research questions.

As I mentioned earlier, the main problem with the interviews was to ensure the trustworthiness of information which was achieved by conducting interviews with non-managerial staff outside of enterprise premises and gaining the trust of the interviewees by agreeing to verbal consent. These interviews have become a form of probe into the credibility of the information collected at the enterprises because they provided me with the workers’ view on the problem.

The most interesting thing for me was that although the managers categorically refused to fill in any paperwork, they allowed the interviews to be recorded, while non-managerial interviewees only agreed to me taking written notes. I can only attribute this to the mentality of Belarusian workers, their fear of persecution. The interviews with the managerial staff had to be carefully planned so that the probes and follow-up questions were both inconspicuous to the management and acted as a control mechanism for the answers to the main questions. To create these complicated interview designs, I consulted quite a few reference sources, but Rubin and Rubin (2012) the one that helped me create the overall structure. All interview data were manually analyzed by coding in relation to the main topics of the study and research questions.

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The next qualitative method is *documentary* analysis of company documents, particularly individual contracts for every category of personnel, and collective agreements. A standard procedure of identifying documents which can be used as sources of data is described in detail in McCulloh (2004) and Scott (2014), and usually includes three key stages: (a) establishing document authenticity, (b) determining the document's reliability as a data source (extremely important because not every document provides usable and objective data), and (c) identifying the document's meaning, that is, establishing that the information provided in it is clearly understandable by the reader. In my case, I could skip step (a) because the documents I worked with were company documents and hence were of an easily identifiable source. Determining their reliability was a bit tricky because, although, in theory, they all were objective documents reflecting certain aspects of human resource management (HRM) in selected enterprises, some of them, such as annual reports, were clearly created for the purpose of reporting to the state and hence contained a distorted picture of reality. The data obtained from the reports had to be verified by using other documentary sources. Payroll tables and personal employee files became great sources of reliable data and helped determine the degree of truthfulness of the annual reports.

Documentary analysis was, by far, the most time-consuming method I used in the study because a large part of documents such as contracts and other personnel-related records was only available to me in printed format in separate workers' folders kept in the personnel management office. Hence, to obtain any aggregate data, I had to create a few tables (one per type of data) and manually type in information from individual workers' files.

As this was not my first experience working with Belarusian enterprises and my collaborator/gatekeeper provided a lot of help with the access, the chosen methods worked really well. At one enterprise, personnel manager even asked me to leave her a copy of the aggregated data for future use because she could see the usefulness of it.

Practical Lessons Learned

Having been doing socio-economic research for quite a few years now, I've learned a few valuable lessons, all of which can be applied to this particular piece of research. The first is: **match your methods to the research context**. The literature presents a large variety of methods and each looks innovative and groundbreaking at first sight. However, the research context may not match the grand design you develop in theory and then your study grinds to a halt. This was true for me when I was starting my PhD and wanted to rely heavily on econometric modeling because that was what I knew best. However, the realities of doing research in the country, where no existing theoretical model works and there is not enough reliable secondary data for a meaningful model, made me abandon naturalism paradigm and turn to pragmatism and the mixed-methods approach.

The second lesson this particular piece of research taught me is: **use gatekeepers** who can get you access even if you have to share authorship. Obviously, this will not work for a PhD, but it is sometimes the only

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quick way to get access to companies, especially in a country like Belarus with its Soviet-inherited culture of keeping good face and keeping employment relations a closed topic for outsiders.

The third valuable lesson is: **be flexible on informed consent**. Your primary and most important job is to get the data while protecting your informants, and if you need to ditch the written consent form to gain their trust, so be it. You will not break the code of research ethics with it and may potentially ensure future collaboration from your informants (especially important when working with managers in the environments where a wrong word may cost people their jobs!).

The fourth lesson from this and previous pieces of research I did on Belarus is: **don't get easily frustrated and plan your time well ahead**. When you start working in the non-Western, "non-developed" economy, be prepared that the archive will be a mess, a room full of folders which will be in order, if you are lucky. Be prepared to conduct interviews in noisy cafes or in people's houses because sometimes this is the only place they will speak freely. Be prepared to develop your own set of measurements because there are no previous applied papers on the subject. Be prepared that data collection will take much longer than you anticipated at the start. Basically, be patient.

Conclusion

The above case study explained in detail the methodology used to research the problem of centrally reduced working time in Belarusian industrial enterprises. In describing research process, I tried to show the reader why I made certain decisions regarding research design (i.e., why two paradigms were used, and particularly, why pragmatism was one of them). The choice of both research paradigm and methods was largely dictated by the complexity of Belarus as a research environment where talking about labor-related issues at the enterprise is an unspoken taboo. The direct result of this culture of silence is limited and unreliable secondary statistics on labor. Thus, to understand the changes to people's working conditions and the way time is managed at the enterprise, I had to get creative in methods and techniques that I chose. From my previous research, I learned that interviews and statistics may both be misleading if analyzed separately, and that you always need to figure out another method which will allow you understand the degree to which you can trust the rest of quantitative and qualitative data you collect. This time, the analysis of company documents was such method. As record keeping has been the most important job of personnel managers at Belarusian enterprises since the Soviet times, they have the habit of automatically entering every little bit of information on a worker into his personal folder. This makes such folders a gold mine for researchers because they frequently contain information you cannot obtain from anywhere else, and thus become an excellent "truth-controlling" tool.

Other research methods that were chosen for the study are pretty standard for socio-economic research. Statistical analysis, questionnaires, and semi-structured interviews are widely used, but this combination, sometimes expanded to include focus groups and documentary analysis, so far has worked pretty well for me in terms of obtaining information about the state of labor in Belarus.

Exercises and Discussion Questions

1. Compare the research design discussed in the case study with your own ongoing research project (dissertation, coursework, etc.) and in groups of 3–4 discuss whether pragmatism would be applicable to your case (15 min).
 2. In groups of 3–4 discuss how you would've approached the ethical dilemma described in the case study. Provide examples of sensitive research environments (10 min).
 3. In your group create a preliminary research methods combination for the study of a conflicting issue within employment relations at a company in a developing economy, which would reflect both managers' and workers' perspectives. Choose one of the three potential research contexts:
 - a) A wholly owned subsidiary of a multinational enterprise (MNE);
 - b) A small private manufacturing company (under 100 employees);
 - c) A state-owned manufacturing company—the main employer in a small provincial town (20 min).
 4. In groups of 3–4 discuss the pros and cons of a semi-structured interview as a method of obtaining information about CRWT. What categories of employees would you interview under similar circumstances. Suggest alternative methods (20 min).
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